

Whose Life will your Love change today?
The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
The Fourth Sunday of Pentecost, Proper 5, Year A, RCL
June 8, 2008

A tale of three encounters:

Matthew sits at his toll booth outside of town. It is hot and dusty; travelers and merchants come and go, and it is Matthew's job to make sure that all tolls and levies are paid as goods are passed from one region to another. It is a thankless job, for no one is happy to see him; no smiles come his way. Matthew has been doing this so long that he can barely remember how it all started. He had promised himself it was only for a little while, until there was enough money to cover family debts and set something aside; then he would seek other employment. But one day turns into another, and there he still sits.

His soul is weary with being the reviled town tax collector. He would leave it all if he could—but where would he go? Who would even take him on as an assistant? Besides, he is too old—apprentices are best when young.

There is laughter and conversation coming from a group coming up the road toward Matthew's booth. They appear to be travelers with no goods; nothing for Matthew to do but wait for them to pass. Something about this group seems different somehow...and then he hears one of the men call another by name, "Jesus", and he remembers hearing about this Jesus—the one who has healed many sick and preached about the coming of God's kingdom. Would that such a holy man greet him, a tax collector! More likely that he would be ignored. Certainly he would never receive an invitation to join such a group; the Pharisees never even look twice at him, and they never healed anyone to the best of Matthew's knowledge.

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The group stops, and the man named Jesus looks intently at Matthew. Hesitant, Matthew looks up, expecting to receive a lecture. But no, this man is smiling at him—and his eyes! Eyes that seem to see right down to the bottom of his lonely, sick soul; and yet, those eyes convey hope. You don't have to stay this way, they seem to say. And then, this Jesus said the most incredible thing to Matthew's ears, "Follow me". Me? Matthew thought, you can't mean me. But to whom else could this question be directed? Jesus waited; and in an instant, Matthew made a decision he never thought he'd have the courage to make. He got up, left his toll booth, and followed this Jesus. Why, he will never know. All he knew was that he needed to be free, and Jesus came and opened the door.

* * *

She remembers how it began. The bleeding started, and she thought it was just her regular monthly bleeding—for a time she would be considered unclean but then when the bleeding stopped she would undergo the mikvah bath, the cleansing waters, and she would be considered clean again, able to enter the temple and move about as freely as a woman could.

But then the bleeding didn't stop. It would grow lighter and then heavier, but it never ceased for very long—not long enough to undergo the proper cleansing ritual and resume activity. She sought advice, as much as she could afford but they did not have an answer for her. As time went on, she tried every suggestion that came her way, but none worked. She felt drained, and tired, and trapped.

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Worse yet, she was increasingly alone. Her affliction was looked up on as a punishment from God from all those around her—even though she could not think of what she had done to deserve such a fate. Her consistent blood flow made her ‘unclean’ and if she touched another, that person would also be considered unclean. Family and friends drifted away; they were afraid of ‘catching’ her misfortune, of being outcasts themselves. And God, where was God? Why was she being made to suffer so?

Isolated as she was, she still could hear the local news and gossip of the day. It was said that there was a new prophet—Jesus—and that he was different somehow—a healer. He had healed a leper, a Roman centurion’s servant, raised up a man who could not walk. It gave her new hope—for surely, surely if he could do these things, her blood flow could be healed as well. All she need do is find him, and it was said he was coming into town.

But getting near him was harder than she thought; for crowds followed him, and she normally avoided crowds, as she was not to touch another. And surely she didn’t want to defile the prophet! But maybe, maybe if she got close enough, she could touch the fringe of his garment—just a little miracle was all she needed, and it would be enough. And he need never know.

And then it happened; he was passing by. Twelve long years of desperation rose inside of her, pushing her forward despite her fear. Quickly, before anyone noticed her actions, she reached out and touched the hem of his cloak. And before she knew what was happening, Jesus turned

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and looked at her. This was it, she thought; would he be angry, would he reject her like all the others? But no, his eyes were different—they were etched with understanding and forgiveness and hope. And then he spoke—‘Take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well’ and she felt changed. The blood flow stopped, and she was healed—in more ways than one. For not only was she physically well—but the anger and sorrow and pain etched in her heart was gone too. She was free—free to love, free to rejoin her family, free to live again.

* * *

His daughter had been growing weaker with each day, each passing hour. The fever consumed her, and nothing that the priests had done had helped. She was only twelve years old; she had her whole life in front of her. She was loved dearly by her parents, and her father would have done anything for her—but now all he could do was to sit by her side, helpless to cure her. Death was imminent; it hung in the air.

He was confused and grieved. He had led a good life, lived under the law, read the scriptures, was faithful. God was supposed to protect the righteous; and she was just an innocent child! Why was this happening? The question lay in his heart like a stone. He was willing to do anything—but what? A servant told him that this Jesus was coming into town—he heard of this Jesus and the miracles surrounding him. Could this Jesus even rescue someone at the edge of death? He would never forgive himself if he did not try—even if this Jesus was not popular with his fellow leaders.

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He got up to see Jesus and plead for his daughter's life, and set out through the town. As he ran toward the crowd, a servant caught up with him—'your daughter has died' he said. No! he thought. It cannot be. Should he even continue to hope? Realistically, no—but he knew his scripture; death was not the final word, even Elijah had raised a widow's child. This could happen—it must! He must make this Jesus see, make him come! No time for niceties, time was of the essence; he found Jesus and asked to come. And Jesus came—pushing through the mourners, dismissing them despite their disbelief. Entering the house, Jesus took her by the hand, and spoke quietly to her. Then life entered into her, breath filled her lungs, and the fever was gone. She was healed, whole, restored. The father was weak with emotion, with gratitude, with joy. Never would he doubt God's love, God's powerful love, again.

All three of these stories show forth God's radical forgiveness, God's commitment to healing and wholeness and most of all, restoration. For not only were all three restored to an intimate relationship with God, but they were also restored to their communities. The outcast tax collector found a home as Jesus' disciple; the woman could rejoin her family and friends; and the girl was restored to life and the loving arms of her family. For we are not meant to be alone. As Christians, we are called to continue Jesus' work of restoration—reaching out and restoring one another. We are to reach out even to the most lost: the ones on the fringes of our society, the poverty stricken, war ravaged, homeless; but also the ones lost in our midst: the sick, the lonely, the mentally ill, the addict. It is hard work, but it is what love asks of us. It is in that love we are born, by that love we are called, and it is that love we are to share.

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Three encounters, three lives changed—and more. Whose life will your love change today?